"A Word of Hope for a World of Hurt"
a sermon by Cynthia M. Campbell
President, McCormick Theological Seminary
January 31, 2010

Romans 8: 18-30
Isaiah 43:1-4

On Labor Day this past fall, Garrison Keillor, legendary creator and host of the radio program "A Prairie Home Companion" suffered a mild stroke. Mild enough that he drove himself to the hospital, where (according to his column in the newspaper) he was declared on the chart to be a "67 year old white male, alert and appropriate." I heard that he may stop hosting the thirty-year old program in another year or two but will remain as artistic coordinator. If he does, I'll miss that wonderful voice every Saturday afternoon. I've been a dedicated fan of the humorist from mythical Lake Woebegone, Minnesota, since the early 1980's. I will never forget hearing him live for the first time in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. One of his routines used to be to develop a fake commercial based on something related to the locale of the performance. That night, he did a "commercial" about how to start a home business harvesting mildew. I thought everyone in the audience would almost literally die laughing.

One of the features I enjoy the most is when Garrison teams up with three other regulars to form what he calls "The Hopeful Gospel Quartet." The old songs they sing (most of which I've never heard before) are hokey; the theology (on one level) is simplistic; but as Keillor and company sing them, they are profoundly hopeful. God will see us through; God has a home waiting for us; God can be trusted to be good; God loves us everyone. It is gospel, and it is what gospel is supposed to be: full of hope.

Hope is something that is in somewhat short supply these days. The reasons are so obvious that they almost do not bear repeating. Uncertainty, unemployment, loss of retirement income, loss of health care coverage: almost all of us (or those close to us) have been touched by these things. Even as the economy begins to recover, all the experts urge us to be cautious. Real recovery -- replacement of jobs and income -- is a ways off. To mix the metaphors that pass for analysis, the skies may be brighter but we are certainly not out of the woods yet.

The "Brief Statement of Faith" of our Presbyterian Church puts it well: we live "in a broken and fearful world." We know this. But we come here, together looking for a word of hope. What is it? What *is* the hopeful gospel? How do we proclaim it to ourselves and to a hurting world?

Perhaps the best place to begin is to remind ourselves that "hope" (especially Christian hope) is not optimism. Optimism is an outlook or disposition. Some people may be more predisposed to this than others; we all know people who seem to be able to look on the "sunny side" of life. There are people who seem consistently to find reasons to be positive when others are negative. This is optimism; it is a way people choose to look at things.

Hope is something different. Like faith and love (the great "three" that Paul lifts up in I Corinthians 13), hope is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a deep conviction, an internal compass, a bedrock or core value that shapes everything. Noted author Sister Joan Chittister says that hope is born out of struggle; in fact, she says, struggle or difficulty is the crucible of hope, the process by which hope takes root in the soul. The hope that comes to us through the stories and songs of the Bible is not hope *in spite* of difficulty and danger. No, biblical hope looks those very dangers squarely in the face and sees something else. Biblical hope sees the present circumstance with the eyes of memory. Again, Sister Joan: "memory is the seedbed of hope." [i]

The real source of Christian hope is the story of God with God's people. To be sure, there are many wonderful and inspiring stories of contemporary people who have overcome adversity, who have lived through pain and suffering, who have risen above oppression and poverty to lives of great accomplishment. These stories inspire us. They can give us courage and hope. But there is another story that is even more important because it is the ground out of which all the other stories ultimately grow. It is the story of God and God's love affair with the world and with humanity.

One of the great wonders of the world is not a place of great natural beauty (like the Rocky Mountains); it is not a great technical achievement (like putting a human being on the moon); it is not an amazing artistic triumph (such as Bach's "B Minor Mass). One of the greatest wonders of the world is the religious imagination of Israel recorded in the Old Testament. Thousands of years ago, this (relatively speaking) small part of the human family came to a view of the Holy that is simply remarkable. This religious imagination has two fundamental ideas: first, God is good and not evil; second, God makes promises to humanity and God never goes back on those promises.

The first idea is captured in the story of creation. Unlike other creation stories from antiquity, Israel's story imagines God as the sole source of everything that is. In a poem of surpassing elegance, the story of

---

[i] Joan Chittister, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*, Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003.

creation is punctuated by the heart-stopping refrain, “And God saw that it was good.” The climax of the story is the creation of human beings, and the poem ends this way: “God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good” – goodness that springs from the very being of God.

But Israel’s religious imagination has a second and even more powerful idea. The Bible knows that the world we inhabit is more than a work of great beauty; there is evil in the world – pain and suffering and violence. As the Bible sees it, evil comes not from God but as a result of the freedom God built into human beings and into creation itself. The very first story in the Bible after creation is one of unspeakable tragedy as one of the children of Adam and Eve murders the other. How does God respond to this? If you were writing this story, what would you have God do about such despicable behavior?

As the book of Genesis unfolds, what we see is that God chooses one man and his family, Abraham and Sarah, to become partners in the creation of a new human community. God promises that through them, God will bless all the families of the earth. Generations later, God rescues the descendants of Abraham and Sarah from slavery in Egypt and gives them a set of teachings we call “the Law” in order to help them learn how to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God.

The rest of the Bible is the agonizing and exhilarating story of the relationship between God and the people God chose to be God’s own. It is the story of promises that God made again and again. It is the story of how, despite human betrayal and denial, God remained steadfast and faithful and committed. Kings came and went; wars were fought; society forgot its basic duties to care for the poor and defenseless; prophets raged and called for repentance, turning around, the mending of ways. Human disobedience had terrible consequences. Through it all, God continued to say to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, (in words not unlike a marriage vow): you are my people and I am your God.

Then, the story took a devastating turn. Israel as a nation lost its moral core: the powerful took advantage of the weak; the rich cheated the poor; kings made political bargains with disastrous consequences. Finally, the armies of Babylon invaded; they destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, which everyone believed was God’s own dwelling place on earth. All the leaders and officials and their families were enslaved and marched off to Babylon. Some interpreted this as God’s judgment; others as the consequence of Israel’s own choices; all experienced this as God’s abandonment of them.

Then a remarkable thing happened. In days of deep darkness, during exile in Babylon, a prophet whose words are now part of the Book of Isaiah

spoke for God in this remarkable way: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned…. [Y]ou are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.” This is *God* talking. This is the Holy One; the Creator of everything that is; the One who does not need us but chooses to love us. Note, please, that the promise is not that Israel (we) would never be caught in the waters of disaster. God does not promise that we will be spared the fire of tragedy. What God promises is never to abandon us but rather preserve us as God’s own. And this is the amazing, mysterious thing: it is not *in spite of tragedy* – it is in the *midst of tragedy* that God speaks these words.

For weeks, as the tragedy of the earthquake in Haiti has unfolded, people have asked: where is God in all of this? Religious leaders who insist on reading only one part of the story claim that this disaster was God’s doing – God’s judgment – God’s will. This idea is not only obscene (because if that is who God is, what exactly is the point of believing?). The idea that earthquakes or tsunamis or hurricanes are divine judgment imagines that God is into micro-management on a grand scale; that God violates the very freedom that God built into the natural world. But most dangerous of all, the idea that disasters are God’s will denies God’s own promise: “I have called you by name; you are mine.”

Memory is the seedbed of hope, Sister Joan Chittister says. And this memory of the promises God made to God’s people is precisely what the Apostle Paul calls upon in Romans 8. Before Paul was the greatest writer of the early Christian movement, Paul was a Rabbi. He trained for years as a student of Jewish texts and teaching. And Paul by no means abandoned that teaching. What happened is that Paul became convicted that in the life, death and especially the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, God was making good on all of those promises made to Israel over the centuries. In Jesus, Paul argues, the extent of God’s love is fully displayed in a way that makes clear God’s purpose. That purpose Paul sees is not only to love the literal descendants of Abraham and Sarah but to redeem the whole creation and all people. As he so lyrically says, “the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” – the completion of God’s whole human family.

Here, Paul works out an idea from Hebrew scriptures, from the story of Israel: God *calls*, God *chooses* people to be God’s own. It is all God’s doing. The word Paul uses to describe this is “predestination.” “Those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son in order that [the Son, Jesus] might be the firstborn [through his resurrection] within a large family.” Contrary to popular understanding, predestination is the most *hopeful* of ideas. Predestination does not mean that God has *predetermined the events* of your life or mine. Predestination

means that God has *determined the outcome.* The outcome of your life and mine is summed up in the words with which Paul closes this chapter: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” Paul lists tragedies that befall us all – hardship, loss, sickness, death. Then he concludes: “I am sure that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” That’s a promise. That’s the gospel. That is our hope.